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ARTICLE

The Counter-Conduct of Medieval Hermits

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ABSTRACT: The hermit posed a challenge to a medieval Church that emphasized rule, order, and discipline since oversight of their life could be virtually non-existent. The writings of Richard Rolle, hermit, negotiates the space between Foucauldian *exomolgesis* and *exoagouresis* as Rolle strove to articulate the identity of the hermit without any kind of church endorsement. As well, he forged his life out of a struggle with concepts of medieval sin, specifically Pride, which placed him in a queer position in terms of relationships with his surrounding community. His way of life was highly influential in his local community, however, and, through manuscript dissemination, beyond. Because he experienced mystical visions without church oversight, his eremitic life and example inspired a movement toward lay, affective piety in the later Middle Ages. The hermit, in his case, challenges the medieval Church's hierarchy in that hermits practice a form of living at a local level, placing them in dangerous, sometimes heretical, positions that force the Church to either absorb their practices or suppress them.

Keywords: Richard Rolle, hermits, counter-conduct, *exomolgesis*, *superbia*, *exoagouresis*

The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.

—Michel Foucault, *Interview*, October 25, 1982.

Michel Foucault identifies the mystical in the Middle Ages as a site for counter-conduct towards a Church hierarchy who's law overlooks and may even suppress the individual's experience of God. Although, Foucault highlights particularly mystical works, a kind of religious *life* was a site of disruption for the medieval church, as well. The rise in the numbers of hermits in the mid-Middle Ages paralleled an increase in the writing of various manuals, which attempted to define the solitary religious life. Such manuals as Grimaic's *Rule for Solitaries* or the oft-translated *The Myrour of Recluses* created a code of conduct that attempted to circumscribe the life of the solitary.

These manuals suggest that the eremitic life, one that valued a form of living that claimed authenticity against that of contemporary religious living was as problematic for the Church as mysticism itself.

The hermit posed a challenge to a medieval Church that emphasized rule, order, and discipline since oversight of their life could be virtually non-existent. The case of Richard Rolle, the topic of this paper, is important, as he took on the mantle of hermit without any kind of church endorsement. As well, he forged his life out of a struggle with concepts of medieval sin, specifically Pride, which placed him in a queer position in terms of relationships with his surrounding community. His way of life was highly influential in his local community, however, and, through manuscript dissemination, beyond. Because he experienced mystical visions without church oversight, his eremitic life and example inspired a movement toward lay, affective piety in the later Middle Ages. The hermit, in his case, challenges the medieval Church's hierarchy in that hermits practice a form of living at a local level, placing them in dangerous, sometimes heretical, positions that force the Church to either absorb their practices or suppress them.

Richard Rolle is one of the more famous, albeit understudied, hermits in medieval England. Richard Rolle's path to the eremitic life could best be described as unusual. Rolle was born c. 1295 and died in 1349 in Yorkshire, possibly from the Black Death. He went to school briefly in Oxford, but left the university in pursuit of what he considered a more authentic Christian life. His *Office*, prepared by the nuns of Hampole who attempted to seek Rolle's canonization, declares that his leave from Oxford was a desire to avoid the "maximus hiis qui uacant carnis lasciuia [those who give themselves to fleshly lusts]."¹ He was never officially sanctioned to be a hermit. He requested that his sister bring him two tunics, one grey and one white and meet him in the woods. He took these vestments from her, and then he cut the garments in order to make an approximation of a hermit's habit. Upon seeing Rolle cut up her clothes, his sister thought he had gone mad and ran away. As Virginia Davis remarks, the vestments of a hermit were key to their identity. They signified "humility of heart, chastity, and contempt for world and worldly things."² From this point on, Rolle wandered. As Frances Comper phrases it "although a wanderer he was a hermit, and although a hermit a wanderer."³ Rolle's change of habitation usually resulted from discord with the women he chose to advise. He was accused of criticizing his female benefactor's fashion choices too harshly, inappropriate touching of women, as well as over-zealousness. Rolle finally ended his days as confessor to the

¹ Reginald Maxwell (ed.), *The Officium and Miracula of Richard Rolle of Hamphole* (London: MacMillan, 1919), 23. Translation based on Frances M. M. Comper, *The Life and Lyrics of Richard Rolle* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1928), 301.

² Virginia Davis, "The Rule of Saint Paul the First Hermit," *Monks, Hermits, and the Ascetic Tradition*, edited by W. J. Sheils (Padstow: T.J. Press, 1985), 209.

³ Frances M.M. Comper, *The Life and Lyrics of Richard Rolle* (New York: Barne and Noble, 1928), ix.

nuns of Hampole, writing various texts for one Margaret Kirkby a nun and then anchorite living on the grounds.

Richard Rolle's life and works expresses a specific kind of project of individual religious life in the Middle Ages. Although terminology surrounding the ascetic life could be muddled, as I will discuss, the hermit led a religious life rooted in the lives of the Desert Father and Mothers of early Christianity. This essay seeks to think about eremiticism as a way of life that challenged the institutional forms of religious living instilled by the Church. As well, the hermit exists in the struggle between two strains of Christian life that Michel Foucault identifies as *exomologesis* and *exoagouresis*. On the one hand the hermit strove to continually verbalize their thinking, what Nikolas Rose calls rendering "oneself truthfully into discourse,"⁴ and, yet, because of the role of the hermit as exile, they also worked to sacrifice that self. As Foucault writes, "we have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourselves."⁵ Of course, the hermit was intimately linked to the life of the Church, but their way of life posed a critique of the Christian community and institution, as well as proposed alternate ways to experience the divine and work in the world.

Before delving into eremiticism in the Middle Ages, it is worth considering the kinds of religious lives available to the medieval Christian devotee. The monk or nun, for example, lived an institutionally sanctioned life within the rules set out by the order and the Church. Even the Franciscans, who initially challenged the practices of the Church through street preaching and a commitment to poverty, were eventually absorbed into the monastic forms of the Church and the order devolved into internal strife that led to charges of abuse and materialism.⁶ The anchorite and hermit constitute other forms of religious life that followed the contours of monastic living, while often setting themselves apart, rejecting the heteronormative values of the surrounding world. Anchorites lived a religious life confined to a cell or anchorhold connected to a church or other sanctioned space. Women were more often anchorites than men and there is much critical discussion of the inherent sexism to anchoritic practices as a way to corral female religious practice.⁷ Hermits lived a looser religious life, and perhaps, this is why the eremitic life is more difficult to pin down. It may have posed a category problem since the life of the hermit did not necessarily conform to any *particular* rule, often cobbling together a rule as they lived or claiming to live a rule outside the confines of a monastery or cell. Their life was an attempt to express an authentic Christian life, reaching into past practices as a way to live in the contemporary age.

Eremitic values often conflicted with social norms, as well. The hermit's very lifestyle rejected traditional concepts of community, wealth, or family that stood as pillars of Western

⁴ Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, (London: Fress Association, 1999, 2nd Ed.), 222.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," in Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

⁶ For what he calls the "painful institutionalization" of the Franciscan movement see André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: the Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, translated by Michael F. Cusato (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), especially 94-103.

⁷ See Nancy Warren's *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkley: U of California P, 1985).

pastoral power. At the same time that the hermit was marked by their rejection of structures of normality, they were also celebrated as important members of the community. The hermit could fulfill a societal niche such as gatekeeper or forest-developer. The hermit, then, lived a life that transformed societal strictures, and, by performing that very life, they also posed a serious critique of the very nature of Christian-being. As John McSweeney writes, religious transgression has “the capacity to disrupt a thought.”⁸ While posing this destabilization, however, hermits were also admired, respected even, for choosing to live a life that was deemed authentic and following the contours of a Christianity unavailable to the parish. The hermit was a reminder of another kind of Christian life.

In his 1 March 1978 lecture, Michel Foucault defines conduct as

the activity of conducting [*conduire*] [...] but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself [*se conduit*], lets oneself be conducted [*se laisse conduire*], is conducted [*est conduit*] and, finally, in which one behaves [*se comporter*] as an effect of a form of conduct [*une conduit*] as the action of conducting or of conduction [*conduction*].⁹

This definition opens up a key issue in thinking about the hermit. Hermits conduct *themselves* in many aspects of day-to-day life. This kind of self-conduct adds a nuance to Foucault’s definition of conduct since his definition indicates both that the conducted submits to those who conduct, and also, that the form of conduct is an effect of conduction. Yet, hermits themselves use models of conduct that do not require oversight and sometimes oversight is unavailable in terms of their movements from community to community or physical remoteness from a community. As Rotha Mary Clay writes in her seminal work on hermits and anchorites in medieval England: “the solitary was canonically appointed and placed under definite rule, but every age has its free-lances. The difficulty connected with due order and discipline were as old as the sixth century monachism.”¹⁰ Clay categorizes hermits and anchorites throughout her own analysis by utilizing their setting as a marker of the life they led. So, for example there are hermits who are cave-dwellers or fen-dwellers, while others lived in the gates of the cities. Clay’s analysis follows a biological taxonomy popular in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, but even within her taxonomy the life of the hermit poses significant categorical challenges.

Types of Eremitic Rules

In this section I want to briefly catalogue various eremitic and monastic rules and their projections of certain kinds of religious livings. These distinctions between kinds of solitary life in the Middle Ages were more muddled than even Clay indicates. For example Anselm of

⁸ John P. McSweeney, “Religion in the Web of Immanence: Foucault and Thinking Otherwise after the Death of God,” *Foucault Studies*, vol. 15 (Feb 2013), 77.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*, edited by Michel Senellart, and translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 195.

¹⁰ Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 89.

Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) had difficulty choosing between a monastic or eremitic life. As Tom License indicates the influence of eremitic life had become so influential that “a learned man like Anselm, after studying in a Benedictine monastery, looked to eremitism as an independent vocation.”¹¹ Eremitism is seen as a different vocation, and with it comes different expectations from that of monastic life.

Before delving into the rule set out by Grimlaicus which addresses solitary living specifically, it is worth thinking about *The Rule of Saint Benedict* as it is such a touchstone for medieval religious living and outlines a biopolitics for a monk’s day-to-day activities. This will serve as a kind of relief to the other rules discussed in this essay. Benedict (c. 480-547) lived during the last days of the Roman Empire. While in Rome, he rejected the paganism he saw around him in the city and decided to separate himself from society and live in a cave. Other monks took note of his living and asked to join him. As his followers grew, he began to search for locations that could support a monastic community. Benedict established a series of monasteries, eventually settling himself in Cassino. His *Rule* is noteworthy as it sets out basic rules for establishing a monastery, for bureaucratic functioning, as well as for the inner life of the monk that greatly affected monastic living throughout the Middle Ages.¹²

For Benedict, there are various kinds of monks. Benedict’s categorization indicates that, again, the monastic and eremitic lives borrowed from one another, and, as well, that there were various ways to express religious living even within monastic confines. First, there are the cenobites who belong to a monastery, but there are also anchorites or hermits who “have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time and have passed beyond the fervor of monastic life.”¹³ The third kind of monk is “sarabites” who claim to be monks, but who live worldly lives. Benedict has little patience for this third group.

The business of the monastery is handled by the abbot, but Benedict’s emphasis throughout the *Rule* is defining the monk’s life as intimately intertwined with the virtue of humility. Humility is in opposition to self-will. As Benedict writes, “do not gratify the promptings of the flesh; hate the urgings of self-will. Obey the orders of the abbot unreservedly, even if his own conduct—God forbid—be at odds with what he says.”¹⁴ This thread of humility as linked to obedience runs through the text: later Benedict comments that humility must be practiced “in this obedience under difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust conditions.”¹⁵ The monk must submit to the rule as an imitation of Christ. As Christ endured suffering for the love of God, so must the monk in all he does. This sublimation of the self-will under the umbrella of obedience is important as the monk becomes one with the rule, or, as Benedict phrases it: “the common rule

¹¹ Tom License, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society: 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 36.

¹² For a detailed analysis of medieval monastic ritual see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), especially Chapter Four.

¹³ St. Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, edited by Thomas Fry (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1981), 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

of the monastery.”¹⁶ Benedict concludes the *Rule* by indicating that obedience is only the beginning of the path to perfection. The monks must use the example set forth in Scripture and move further into virtuous living.

Each of these kinds of religious lives influenced one another. We should not imagine that they did not borrow from each other in terms of regulations, living conditions, and theological concerns, but we can consider a crucial distinction between the solitary living of hermits and the solitary life of other forms of religious living such as monks, nuns, and anchorites as having to do with enclosure. Grimlaicus’ *Rule for Solitaries*, written around the year 900 in Metz, separates out anchorites from cenobites.¹⁷ Grimlaicus’ text is important in that it is one of the first rules aimed at solitaries themselves. Although it borrows from *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, it tailors the rule for a specific audience of solitaries.

While Benedict emphasizes humility in opposition to its companion sin, pride, a sin and virtue relationship that we will return to in discussing the work of Richard Rolle, Grimlaicus’ *Rule* adds a distinctive layer to categorization of religious living. For Grimlaicus anchorites are hermits, while cenobites are solitaries living in monasteries. Later generations will distinguish between anchorites and hermits further. Grimlaicus’ rule, however, is aimed at the cenobites—those who live in monastic confines but in their own secluded cell. Because the cenobite is living within a community, much of the early emphasis in his work is on the act of renunciation. Renunciation becomes the key to conducting oneself in relation to the surrounding monks who may be concerned with the problems of the monastic bureaucracy. Grimlaicus writes, “for if you renounce everything that you have yet do not renounce your own way of acting, you are certainly not Christ’s disciple. If you renounce your possessions, you are renouncing what belongs to you, but if you renounce your wicked way of acting, you are renouncing yourself.”¹⁸ Renunciation of possessions is its own category, but it is clearly not enough. Cenobites must separate themselves not only from ownership of material possessions but from actions associated with their former life as well. This break indicates a transition from monk to cenobite—a life that is lived while in the very monastic community that first formed them.

The actions of the cenobite within the monastic walls parallel Foucault’s concerns with counter-conduct within the pastorate itself. As Foucault writes, the moments of counter-conduct ask key questions: “by whom do we consent to be directed or conducted? How do we want to be conducted? Towards what do we want to be led?”¹⁹ These are key questions for the cenobite who stands in relief to later manifestations of the hermit. For in Grimlaicus’ estimation, the cenobite is still led by the conduct within the monastic walls, but in a different manner. This difference is marked as that between the active life and the contemplative life. The active life has to do with making “progress in human affairs and to moderate the movements of the rebellious body by the

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Grimlaicus, *The Rule for Solitaries*, translated by Andrew Thornton (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical P, 2011), 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78*, 197.

dictate of reason.”²⁰ This is the life of the monk who practices works of mercy to his fellow monks as well as the surrounding community. The contemplative life, on the other hand, has a goal of ascending “by the desire for perfection beyond human affairs and constantly to work at increasing virtues.”²¹ This is the goal of the cenobite. This distinction marks a self-conduct that eschews the maintenance of the monastery and the life required of it, for a life that both denies the self as well as cultivates a kind of self that is bent on virtuous living. These twin concerns—self-renunciation and self-cultivation towards perfection are a hallmark of any kind of eremitic living.

The hermit, then, becomes one who removes oneself from an institutional structure in order to pursue self-conduct. Henrietta Leyser writes that the eremitical life was for the few, but it attracted those who were “the eccentric, the poor, the unlearned, or the distinguished.”²² If in Grimlaicus’ rule, the solitary was defined from within the institution, the development of the hermit in the later Middle Ages is one defined against the backdrop of institutional and societal forms of Christianity itself. Monasteries, nunneries, and parishes are institutional bureaucracies that defined conduct through monastic rules, papal bulls, or penitential manuals. What is of interest in terms of Christian living in the late Middle Ages is how the solitary life was defined out of and against these bureaucratic paths.

The problem of the hermit, then, can be distilled to this matrix: their kind of living is revered, but “no one oversees their activities.”²³ As Foucault writes of pastoral power, “to accept the authority of another means that each of the actions that one will be able to perform will have to be known or, in any case, will have to be able to be known by the pastor, who has authority over the individual and over several individuals [...]”²⁴ Yet, pastoral power may have little effect on those who are not routinely overseen such as the hermit. Thus, there was suspicion cast over their behaviors. As Clay writes, “the hermit should make obedience to God alone, because he himself is abbot, prior, and prefect in the cloister of his heart.”²⁵ Anchorites, for example, were enclosed and usually assigned a priest who was their confessor and sometime amanuensis. The hermit, although licensed to preach, did not have their activity so fully under observation. As the medieval poet, William Langland, critiques eremitic life in his medieval poem, *Piers Plowman*, “like a hermit without an order he forms a sect by himself with no rule and no law of obedience.”²⁶ From Langland’s brief commentary, we may speculate that forging a Christian life outside of well-defined boundaries, such as a monastery or nunnery, was met with suspicion, criticism, and doubt.

²⁰ Grimlaicus, *The Rule for Solitaries*, 44.

²¹ Ibid.,

²² Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe 1000-1150* (London: MacMillan P, 1984), 15.

²³ Ibid., 78.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Power (1978),” in Jeremy R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 124.

²⁵ Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, 88.

²⁶ Quoted in Davis, “The Rule of Saint Paul the First Hermit,” 205.

The lack of well-defined boundaries is evident in other documents pertaining to hermits, as well. In the *Benediction of a Hermit* from the 16th century, the only indication of what a hermit is to do in his chosen vocation, comes from this passage said by the Bishop after the “converses” has donned his newly blessed vestments:

Brother, behold we have bestowed upon you the dress of a hermit and, together with it, we admonish you to live in purity, sobriety and holiness. Pass your time in vigils, in fasting, in work and prayer, and in the works of mercy so that you may possess eternal life and so live for ever and ever. Amen.²⁷

The vagaries of this passage are repeated in other benedictions of hermits such as the one in MS Lambeth 192 fol. 46 and the so-called Benediction of St. Celestine in Sloane 1584, and indicate that within each of these benedictions a hermit may choose to fulfill hermitic expectations in a variety of ways.²⁸ After the benediction is over, there is indication that the bishop should educate the hermit more in “hermitic” ways. This instruction is mostly taken up with the prayers he should say at various times of the day, but it also indicates that the hermit should not be idle and should spend time doing civic works (such as road building) or making his own food.

This loose rule of hermits made them targets for more conservative strains of religious thinking. In 1389, for example, Richard II passed an anti-vagrancy statute made to deal with men who had taken on the life of a hermit without proper identification from their ordinaries.²⁹ Foucault’s work in religious studies assists in thinking about the eremitic life and its form of critique. To return to his 1 March 1978 lecture, Foucault highlights asceticism and mysticism as two aspects of counter-conduct in medieval Catholicism. For Foucault, “asceticism is [...] a sort of tactical element.”³⁰ Mysticism, escapes pastoral power in that it is the “privileged status of an experience” as the “soul sees itself.”³¹ These two tactics find their way into Rolle’s eremitic being as they are key to his identity formation. With the exile inherent in eremitic identity—whether physical or mental—the hermit is attempting to create a space to see the soul outside of the abilities of pastoral power to create. With this, Foucault points out in a much earlier essay that mysticism was

incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, of rapture, of penetration, of ecstasy, of that overpouring which leaves us spent: all of these experiences seemed to lead, without interruption of limit, right to the heart of divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself.³²

²⁷ <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/benediction.html>

²⁸ M.S. Lambeth 191 and Sloane 1584. Unpublished translations. Edited and translated by Michelle Sauer.

²⁹ Davis, “The Rule of Saint Paul the First Hermit,” 206.

³⁰ Foucault, *Security Territory, Population*, 207.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³² Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression (1963),” in Jeremy R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 57.

This mystical tradition running parallel to the eremitic life reveals the transgressive capability of combining the two projects of asceticism and mystical practice. By creating a life that is always already crossing boundaries, pastoral power is unable to fully account for the eremitic or mystical. This combination of projects perhaps finds its best realization in a struggle to define a rule for hermits and thinking about how hermits created a form of living.

The Case of Richard Rolle, Hermit

We can see the controversy over the eremitic life in a new light when we consider the difference between the rules I've discussed in the previous section and a *form of living*. Giorgio Agamben writes that a form of living "is not a norm imposed on life, but a living that in following the life of Christ gives itself and makes itself a form."³³ For Agamben, as for Rolle, attempting to live a life as *form*, in this case following Christ, resists easy categorization and delineates further the power of counter-conduct to resist institutional forms of power.

According to Nicholas Watson, Rolle's defensiveness in his works stems from the fact that "his life as a hermit was still sufficiently unusual to cause suspicion, give opponents room for criticism, and put him on the defensive."³⁴ Watson also continues to point out that it is difficult to even call Rolle unusual because of the wide variety of hermits: from Carthusians to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to Walter Hilton before entering an Augustinian canonry.³⁵ Despite the variety of eremitic vocations, however, it may be fruitful to think of Rolle's concept of eremitic identity as that forged from adversity. This paper is utilizing Foucault to critique the idea of a singular eremitic identity; it is this variety that stands as a testament to hermits as embodying counter-conduct. A common theme that runs throughout Rolle's work and some of the eremitic writing that he influenced is the problem of Pride.

Pride becomes a catalyst for eremitic identity since it is so important to struggle with, tame it, and yet, for Rolle, revel in it under a different intentionality. Before looking at Rolle's work, it would be fruitful to explore the sin of pride in the Middle Ages as a way to think about the discourse of sin that Rolle is adapting and transforming as key to a particular form of eremitic identity.

Augustine defined pride or *superbia* as a sin where the sinner desires to be as God. Many commentators point to the examples of Lucifer and Adam as representatives of Pride. Siegfried Wenzel suggests that for many patristic writers, pride was either the gateway to the other sins or occurred "when one has overcome any or all of the six other vices."³⁶ Interestingly, Wenzel ends his 1968 article on a skeptical note; he suggests that since Morton Bloomfield's 1952 study of sins

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, translated by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013), 105.

³⁴ Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and The Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

³⁶ Siegfried Wenzel, "The Seven Deadly Sins: Some Problems of Research," *Speculum*, vol. 43 (1968), 4.

in the Middle Ages there has not been any significant work on sins “due to their lack of appeal and interest for modern man as a meaningful pattern in the analysis of human behavior [...]”³⁷ Yet, more recently the Oxford University Press has published a paperback series on the Seven Deadly Sins. These books were originally lectures born from collaboration between the New York Public Library and the Oxford University Press. The minister, Michael Eric Dyson, suggests real, positive benefits to pride, especially in the black community. His formulation of Aristotelian pride, “owning up to one’s true moral achievement and expecting others to follow suit is by no means an act of vanity or conceit. The virtue of pride, or as Aristotle terms it, ‘proper pride’ is the means found between extremes of empty vanity and undue humility.”³⁸ Dyson later points out “If Aristotle’s ‘proper pride’ is a virtue to blacks whose self-respect has been battered, then white pride is often the vice that makes pride necessary.”³⁹ Aristotle himself points out that pride is “a sort of crown of the virtues for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them.”⁴⁰ Aristotle’s formulation is worth bearing in mind, since Rolle’s own commentary on pride seems on the surface, contradictory. But, pride becomes a site for self-mortification and self-creation. As Foucault writes, “mortification is a kind of relation from oneself to oneself. It is a part, a constitutive part of the Christian self-identity.”⁴¹ But, Rolle attempts to articulate an ethics of pride: it is the “fracture between being and praxis.”⁴² In understanding Rolle in Aristotelian terms, a *proper* pride, we can understand Rolle’s high valuation of the contemplative life while critiquing lay and religious leadership.

To situate Rolle in terms of the revolutionary mystical practices that Foucault outlines in his lectures reveals the limits in the relation between pastoral power and mystical revolution. Pastoral power may indicate the normalization of the Christian soul in terms of defining sinful behaviors and prohibitions, while eschewing the individual’s experientially-based spirituality. Mystical revolution, then, shows how sinful behavior may be transformed in the self-fashioning of the individual Christian to something positive while rejecting normalizing community formation. At the same time, the mystic may be more exclusionary in terms of community formation than pastoral power allows for.

For the remainder of this essay, then, I want to examine Rolle’s work, specifically the early *The Fire of Love* (dated by Watson as written before 1343) for its discussions on pride. In this early work, Rolle is working with pride as it pertains to his own struggles. *The Epistle of St. Machari*, which medievalist Ralph Hanna calls “integral to (and perhaps inspired by) the particular self-

³⁷ Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1967), 22.

³⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *Pride* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *The Basic Writings of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 992.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Pastoral Power and Political Reason,” in Jeremy R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 143.

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and The Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), 54.

fashioning by which [Rolle] created himself as hermit and spiritual guru"⁴³ put pride at the forefront of their discussions on eremitic life.

In order to provide a genealogy of eremitic identity as born of Pride, I am beginning with the later *Epistle of Saint Machari* (dated to the 1380's). This will provide a finishing point to the use of Pride so that we may see how Rolle influenced such works. In the *Epistle* the hermit begins with discussing self-knowledge. As the hermit begins to know himself, he will see all of his faults. This will result in confession and penance.⁴⁴ As Rose points out, "in confessing one also constitutes oneself."⁴⁵ However, this confession and penance can lead to troubles for the hermit: "þus þou has synned, bot þou has done þi pennaunce, ande þi synnes [er] forgyffen þe. Now art thy haly [thus you have sinned but you have done your penance and your sins are forgiven. Now you are holy]."⁴⁶ Pride comes from a space where the hermit has struggled with identity, sin, confession, and yet, despite this process, new sin appears. The *Epistle* goes on to indicate that when this sense of pride develops, the other sins quickly follow. In his attempts to combat pride, the hermit may feel that is it hopeless. As God has taken away his support to show the hermit that he needs God, God slowly gives back strength to the hermit saying: "takes my 3ok vpone 3oue and [l]ers of me, for I am mylde and meke in hert [take my yoke upon yourself and learn of me, for I am mild and meek of heart]."⁴⁷ What is remarkable about this sense of pride is the inevitability of it; the hermit is on the right path. He has taken stock of his past life and made amends for it. But, this has cleared the way for sins that he wanted to avoid in the first place. The establishment of a holy life does not prevent the hermit from the same pitfalls; and, as is clear in this *Epistle*, the holy life may set up the hermit for further and more difficult tribulations. However, in noting this formula, it is worth noticing that despite the return to sin, the hermit will realize more than ever his greater connection to God and the hermit's need for *kenosis*, to empty out the self. To fall, to struggle, is to find oneself closer to the holy life than if one had followed a smooth path.

This eremitic struggle with pride is even more pronounced in the work of Richard Rolle, who defines hermits as those who

live loving God and their neighbor; they despise worldly approval; they flee, so far as they may, from the face of man; they hold all men more worthy than themselves; they give their minds continually to devotion; they hate idleness; they withstand manfully the pleasures of the flesh; they taste and seek ardently heavenly things; they leave earthly things on one side without coveting them; and they find their delight in the sweetness of prayer.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ralph Hanna, *Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), xiii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁵ Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 244.

⁴⁶ *Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse*, 94.

⁴⁷ Hanna, *Richard Rolle*, 95.

⁴⁸ Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, edited and translated by Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin, 1972), 83.

And yet, eremitic identity cannot be formed without a community to flee from. Rolle undermines this definition with the content of the rest of the book; in his attempts to flee, to hold more worthy, he wrestles with the problem of intentionality. For Rolle, all men are not more worthy; if anything in *The Fire of Love* it is the contemplative and the contemplative life that Rolle lays out that is the highest and most worthy. The worth comes out of the separation of eremitic identity from the “regular” Christians. The *intent* of the hermit must be clear to live the holiest of lives.

Medieval Intentionality and Exomologesis

The ethic of intention revolves around the “examination of external acts versus internal motive.”⁴⁹ Thus, intentionality parallels what Foucault identifies as *exomologesis*: “a way for the sinner to express his will to get free of the world, to get rid of his own body, to destroy his own flesh and get access to a new spiritual life. It is the theatrical representation of the sinner as willing his own death as a sinner. It is the dramatic manifestation of the renunciation to oneself.”⁵⁰ Intention is a problem that Richard Rolle returns to in many of his works, for he is very condemnatory of those who appear holy, but are not. Rolle repeats this difficult matrix in much of his work; people’s outward holiness serves as a cover for their own sinfulness. As well, his own eremitic actions indicate his own holiness; his often unorthodox movements reinforce his inner intentions to the holy life. Intentionality is important in understanding Rolle’s concept of Pride because there are often condemnations of the same actions he himself is performing as a hermit. The difference, then, is in the intent of those actions.

Richard Rolle’s concern with Pride in *The Fire of Love* ranges from problems regarding hypocrisy in people who outwardly seem holy but are not to concerns over his own actions and the (wanted) condemnation he garners for his actions. Rolle’s emphasis on self-knowledge as born of Pride finds expression in Foucault’s own analysis of the Cynic’s self-knowledge in which “the Cynic changes the value of this currency and reveals that the true life can only be an other life in relation to the traditional life of men, including philosophers.”⁵¹ Rolle would add medieval theologians to Foucault’s analysis, as well. Rolle is attempting to utilize theological concerns to make the hermit a recognizable subject. Early in *The Fire of Love*, Rolle writes that there is no room for loving God and loving things of the world. His example for this is those who are “reprobates:” who “admittedly go to church and even pack it to the doors: they beat their breasts and heave great signs, but none of this means a thing. Seen of men they may be; heard of God they are not.”⁵² This outward show where they outwardly appear to be God-fearing only to be internally

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Zimmerman, “‘It is not the deed but the intention of the doer’: The Ethic of Intention and Consent in the First Two Letters of Heloise,” *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2006), 249.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” in Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 173.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, “28 March 1984: First Hour,” in Frédéric Gross (ed.) and Graham Burchell (trans.) *The Courage of Truth: the Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 314.

⁵² Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 50.

thinking of their possessions or the possessions they want to have is Rolle's standard definition of a lack of life-formation. But these are everyday parishioners.

Rolle holds condemnation for certain kinds of contemplatives, as well. Rolle writes: "those contemplatives who are most on fire with the love of eternity are like those higher beings whose eagerness for eternal love is most enjoyable and outstanding. They never, or scarcely ever, engage in outside activity, or accept the dignity of ecclesiastical preferment or rank."⁵³ Here Rolle begins to fine tune his definition of what a true contemplative is, which he attempts to embody in many ways. For him, a true contemplative never sullies himself with ecclesiastical roles. These roles are not worthy of the contemplative, and although he then attempts to indicate the dignity of a station, in this same section he indicates that God has a place for each one; accepting that place is an act of humility.⁵⁴ Only by being outside is Rolle able to critique and go beyond traditional notions of Pride to define the eremitic life. When Rolle turns to hermits, specifically, those who eschew the outside world shine the brightest: "if anyone wants to polish them, as it were, by loading them up with honors, he will only diminish their ardour [...]. And if they themselves accept public office and dignity, they do in fact demote themselves and become less worth."⁵⁵ Even the holiest of people, who have accepted their place, still "rejoice in the thought that after death their name may be honoured by those who follow them."⁵⁶ Rolle's emphasis here is not reaching and finding stability; the struggle is the hallmark of the good hermit.

Other actions, contribute to a hermit succumbing to Pride. Thus far, Rolle is using Pride to mark those with false intentionality. Seeking knowledge and engaging in talk lead to problems, as well. Rolle writes, "it is love that delights the soul and sweetens the conscience, because it draws it away from lesser pleasures and from the pursuit of one's own glory. Knowledge without love does not edify or contribute to our eternal salvation; it merely puffs up to our own dreadful loss."⁵⁷ Rolle condemns theologians who search out knowledge: "an old woman can be more expert in the love of God—and less worldly too—than your theologian with his useless studying. He does it for vanity, to get a reputation, to obtain stipends and official positions. Such a fellow ought to be entitled not 'Doctor' but 'Fool'."⁵⁸ In the same vein, Rolle condemns the heretic with his "undisciplined and chaotic mind, blinded by its desire for its own reputation [...]."⁵⁹ The contemplative seeking a place in the world, the theologian after his knowledge, the heretic after his reputation are all wanting to go higher: "if you want to know what God is, you are wanting to be as God—and that is all wrong. Face the fact: only God can know himself."⁶⁰

⁵³ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁴ As Judith Butler points out, "ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique" (Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 8).

⁵⁵ Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 91.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 62-63.

There is another aspect of pride that Rolle wrestles with and that is the feeling of pride that may result from insults. And this is directly applicable to Rolle's forging of eremitic identity through adversity and not outward roles. As McSweeney points out regarding Foucault's engagement with religion: "the paradoxical Christian self thus constitutes an 'other' of his thought, which he allows to affect it, drawing it beyond its limits."⁶¹ Rolle's version of pride marks the turn to the personal, and thus, a reflection of a technology of the self, drawing the hermit beyond the limits of sinful prohibitions. Rolle writes, "it would seem to be undoubted that an insult is better than honour, confusion than success, grief than glory. It is by these latter things that a man often lapses into vainglory. Yet if he habitually faced the former with patience he would learn humility in this life here [...]."⁶² The recipe of honor, success, and glory will lead to pride; the other terms, insults, confusion, grief leads to a cultivation of humility. Yet, what is marked about *The Fire of Love* is how much pride Rolle feels in receiving insults and grief. Rolle uses sin, then, as a rupture in his losing of self in order to present or discover himself in hermit-being.

Rolle often, indirectly, defends an action of his by indicating (usually in the third person) that he has undergone a criticism, but then turns around to defend that action. He does not bear his own advice here and take the insults, instead choosing to forge his eremitic identity from these. In this way he is articulating the "me" from the "not-me" within the Pride-event. Rolle is able to utilize the discourse of spirituality for its "politics of continual transformation by holding up what we can be and what is not yet seen."⁶³ For example, Rolle writes on the subject of the contemplative's joy:

there are those who disapprove of laughter and others who praise it [...] surely that which springs from a cheerful conscience and spiritual buoyancy is worth praising? [...] Yet when we are cheerful and joyful the irreligious call us dissolute and when we are serious they call us hypocrites! It is unusual for a man to assess as good in another what he does not find in himself [...]. It is the act of a presumptuous man to think that is others do not follow his own particular way of life they are depraved and deceived! And the cause of it all? He has let go humility.⁶⁴

The irony here needs to be stated: in the same motion that Rolle admits a variety to the religious life, he forges his form from the variety itself and insists on his correctness. Again, the conflict with pride is evident; to forge an eremitic identity Rolle has had to undergo a certain level of scrutiny and insults. His defense of his life choice has resulted in further entanglements with Pride.

⁶¹ John McSweeney, "Religion in the Web of Immanence," 93.

⁶² Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 69.

⁶³ Jeremy Carette, "Rupture and Transformation: Foucault's Concept of Spirituality Reconsidered," *Foucault Studies*, vol. 15 (2013), 71.

⁶⁴ Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 72.

Exile, penance, and purgation are important elements in eremitic identity. As Tom License indicates,

a hermit's personal exile was viewed as a sort of earthly purgation. The idea that penance and purgation were two names for a continuum by which the soul was restored to perfection, the first being usually the name of the process of life, the second its name after death, went back to St. Augustine.⁶⁵

Exile is intimated in the rejection bound to the insult. Rolle exhorts those who choose to pursue the religious life: "people rejoice in honors and are delighted by applause—and this I find true of some who have a reputation for sanctity of life. Such people seem to me either too holy for words, or else complete fools, though men call them wise and learned."⁶⁶ Therefore, knowing the self will result in knowing if one is truly right before God. However, Rolle's method for knowing if one is truly a contemplative is his own rubric involving becoming "self-narrating beings."⁶⁷ Rolle writes, "but if in his self-investigation he finds he is glowing with the heat and sweetness of divine love beyond description, and he is setting out on the contemplative life and is committed thereto" then one might be a contemplative.⁶⁸ Here Rolle points to self-knowledge, knowing if one is truly a contemplative. That identity is wrapped in Rolle's own method, his own experience. The conflict of pursuing the contemplative life and the act of knowing if one is truly a hermit are intertwined in Rolle's thought.

As discussed earlier, medieval religious life was intertwined with a connection to spatial boundaries. The eremitic life lacked clear walls. Rolle further outlines his conflicts when he defends his choice of living quarters. Earlier, Rolle writes that the true contemplative will not care if he sits next to kings or paupers, he does not care about the "riches and dignities of men generally, but the life and merits of each one singly."⁶⁹ This advice comes back to support Rolle's choice of living when he writes

the true lover of God [...] does not worry overmuch whether there is too much or too little. He will deserve infinitely more by his joyful song, by his prayer and contemplation, by his reading and meditation, yes, and by his discretion in eating, than if, without it, he were ever fasting or only eating bread and vegetables while he prayed and read. I myself have eaten and drunk things that are considered delicacies; not because I love such dainties, but in order to sustain my being in the service of God, and the joy of Christ. For his sake I conformed quite properly to those with whom I was living lest I should invent a sanctity where none existed; lest men should overpraise me where I was less worthy of praise.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ License, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society*, 120.

⁶⁶ Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 73.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 11.

⁶⁸ Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, 73.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 77-78.

This narrative defense slides around quite a bit in that Rolle suggests that the place does not matter, the worrying of too much or too little is irrelevant. And yet, by the end of the passage it matters a lot. In conforming to his environment he wards off over-praise. This is to say he rejects showing that he is holy in such august company to avoid them singling him out. Or, if one were to push this passage, Rolle here suggests that he did not want to single himself out where it was not worthy to be noticed that he was, in fact, singling himself out by his choice of the contemplative life. Either way, pride is at the heart of his struggle—he uses Pride to forge hermit-being.

To act like a contemplative when it is not warranted would result, in this case, in too much praise, which might lead him down a path where he might have enjoyed those dainties. Yet in other passages in this book, to be a contemplative, one who is true in his heart, in this situation should not matter. As Rolle writes later “in him who attains the heights of contemplation with joy and ardent love, the desires of the flesh now lie virtually dead.”⁷¹ It is clear, however, that this criticism of his life occurred more than once; yet, he answers this charge not with an appeal to the singularity of the hermitic life, but, rather the need to conform to the community. It is within the struggle of conforming that his intentionality is confirmed as right.

This shift from theologian, parishioner, and heretic, to the contemplatives’ pitfalls, to the accusations of persecution encompasses the various forms of Pride in this work and, in this way, articulate the truth obligations of the eremitic life. Each iteration of pride proves productive in its attempt to render the eremitic identity; the hermit is not striving, the hermit is conforming yet singular, the hermit bears insults, and yet knows that his is the proper life. The hermit possesses self-awareness that saves him from traditional concepts of pride, as *superbia*, to use the sin as a salvific gesture. As Judith Butler writes,

if the question of power and the demand to tell the truth about oneself are linked, then the need to give an account of oneself necessitates the turn to power, so that we might say that the ethical demand gives rise to the political account, and that ethics undermines its own credibility when it does not become critique.⁷²

This reading of Rolle’s text is not to suggest that he is inconsistent or schizophrenic in his attempts to come to identity; it does suggest, however, the productive generation and fragmentary nature of that identity. Pride is to be pushed aside *and* held dear, for how else can we define Rolle’s holding up of his singular life? It is pride, but the intention of it is not to denigrate the self, but to defend his own choices. Pride and identity in this case are intertwined, even, though the Augustinian definition of Pride as being like God, is not the pride, in fact, that Rolle wrestles with at all.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷² Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 124.

Rolle's sense of pride is born out of his unorthodox path to becoming hermit. Perhaps, Rolle's *Fire of Love* is a reification of the eremitic identity as different, not in the mainstream. It is a continuing process. Aristotle's sliding scale of pride more accurately informs Rolle's methodology: the falsely humble hermit who accepts a higher bureaucratic position; on the other end, the churchgoer who's churchgoing sparks their sense of pride in their behavior. The hermit is proud in his chosen path only because it is a virtuous man, born of the conflicts around him, who bears that pride. For Rolle, only this proper pride befits the hermit.

As Foucault formulates it, the pride of the hermit is akin to "the relation to the truth [as] established in the form of a face-to-face relationship with God and in a human confidence with corresponds to the effusion of divine love" that is indicative of the mystical and ascetic traditions.⁷³ In his forging of eremitic life, and in the demands of the face-to-face encounters, Rolle is remapping a Christian body in terms of Foucault's positive *parrhesia*.⁷⁴

Eremitic Nostalgia

The hermit lives in a state of non-knowing. They have committed themselves to a life with an often self-crafted rule that interacts with a normalizing Christianity found in monastic and papal frameworks. At the same time, their attempt at an "authentic" Christian life, one that is not available to the surrounding Christians lends them an air of admiration while leaving them open to attack and critique. The eremitic life must also wrestle with the unknown of God—by attempting a reclamation of ways of being, they both touch the past, while living with the "truth" of mysticism, the formless God of Christian faith. In this way, the hermit is pursuing a negative definition of the individual, a refusal. As John Caputo writes, Foucault "opposes all 'cataphatic' discourse about the individual, discourse that tries to say what the individual is or should be, and he does so in the name of a kind of 'apophatic' discourse, of preserving a purely apophatic freedom."⁷⁵

⁷³ Michel Foucault, "28 March 1984: Second Hour" in Frédéric Gross (ed.), and Graham Burchell (trans.), *The Courage of Truth: the Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 337.

⁷⁴ Adam Kotsko argues that we need to think about the human differently: "humanity stands at a nodal point in the universe, at a nexus of rich variety of relationships. This is true at the level of the individual, as the patristic authors attempted to indicate by their rejections of a monadic soul and their insistence that the human being is the relationship between body and soul—that is, even the individual is relational 'all the way down.' But my core principal means that the body and soul can't be conceived as two inert things that happen to be in relationship to each other. Instead, they are themselves singularities emerging from a network of relationships" (Adam Kotsko, *The Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 189).

⁷⁵ John Caputo, "On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics, and the Night of Truth in Foucault," in John Caputo and Mark Yount (ed.), *Foucault and the Critique of Institutions* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1993), 251.

This inability to present God is the hermit's challenge, for in living a divine life without rule, they present the eremitic life itself as God. Jean-Luc Nancy writes of the mystics approach to God:

whether it be in exile or diaspora, whether it be in the becoming-man or in a threefold-being-in-itself, or whether it be in the infinite recoil of the one who has neither equal nor like [...], this "god" (and in what sense is it divine? How is it divine? This is what we have to think through) absolutely excludes its own presencing—we would even have to say its own valorization as much as its own presencing.⁷⁶

In this presentation that always recedes from categorical and definitional specificity, we see the inability to recover God made present. This *aporia*, then, is what Rolle struggles with in creating an eremitic identity through the problem of the fracture of a life and a rule, an ethics involving being and *praxis*. Pride is both a sin and a path, reformulated to make eremitic being a constant counter-conduct to recover the divine from the very pieces of that *via*.

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⁷⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 41.